

WITH A FRENCH ACCENT AT THE NATIONAL LIBRARY

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On the afternoon of 12 June 1772, a French officer in his late forties wearing a coat of scarlet and blue English velvet landed at Te Hue cove in New Zealand's Bay of Islands. He was accompanied by a number of his fellow officers, a longboat crew and a black slave. They had landed at Te Hue many times in the previous weeks and had enjoyed good relations with the local Maoris. That afternoon they planned to fish with a seine. They were never to return to their ship. Every one of them was surprised and killed and their bodies devoured according to Maori rite. The officer's name was Marc-Joseph Marion Dufresne and the wounds to his side and to his head or neck brought an end one of the most colourful careers in the annals of French maritime history.*

Marion's dramatic demise was later represented in a crayon, pencil and chalk sketch by the celebrated French etcher Charles Meryon (1821–1868). Meryon had visited New Zealand in the 1840s with the French navy and executed his sketch in Paris about 1850—probably as a preliminary study for a more substantial work. Meryon's prospects as a painter, however, were limited because he was colour blind. He ultimately went mad! His large sketch was eventually acquired by Rex Nan Kivell in 1940 as France crumbled before the Nazi blitzkrieg. In February 1992 *NLA News* published a transcript of Hazel de Berg's 1970 interview with Rex Nan Kivell in which he described his dramatic exit from France on one of the last trains out of Paris with Meryon's work rolled up and stuffed down his trouser leg! The pastel sketch was later purchased by the National Library, but Nan Kivell was upset to learn that it was removed from the collection and presented as a gift to the people of New Zealand by Prime Minister Harold Holt during a State visit! When researching illustrations for *An Officer of the Blue*, my biography of Marion Dufresne, I was pleased to discover that despite the loss of Meryon's pastel, the National Library possessed a nineteenth-century lithograph by Focillon entitled "Assassinat de Marion Dufrière" [*sic*] which is based on Meryon's sketch.

Aside from being one of the earliest European visitors to New Zealand, Marion discovered the most westerly islands in the Indian

Ocean (the Crozet and Prince Edward Groups) and was the first explorer after Tasman to visit Van Diemen's Land. His expedition also brought back the first description of the Tasmanian Aborigines. Despite these achievements, Marion Dufresne is curiously absent from the pages of the *Australian Dictionary of Biography*.

The first published account of Marion's expedition of 1771–1772 was undertaken by the astronomer and voyager Alexis Marie de Rochon (1741–1817). Rochon edited the journal of Julien Crozet (1728–1782), Marion's second-in-command on the *Mascarin*. His effort appeared in Paris, in 1783, under the title *Nouveau voyage à la mer du sud*. The National Library holds the first English translation of this book. Published in 1891 and entitled *Crozet's Voyage to Tasmania, New Zealand, the Ladrone Islands and the Philippines in the Years 1771–1772*, it was the work of the remarkable Austrian anthropologist and author Henry Ling Roth (1855–1925). Roth probably came across Rochon's version of Crozet's journal while undertaking research for his pioneering book *The Aborigines of Tasmania* (1890). The historical significance of Crozet's description of the Tasmanian Aborigines would have been immediately obvious to him. In the past century the National Library has collected other published translations and transcriptions from Marion Dufresne's voyage which are of great ethnohistorical importance given the rapid destruction of Tasmanian Aboriginal culture and the few surviving primary contact accounts.

In planning his voyage, Marion Dufresne almost certainly made use of a book by his old shipmate, the Abbé Alexandre-Gui Pingré which carefully reviewed the history of exploration in the search for the best station to observe the 1769 transit of Venus. The National Library holds a copy of Pingré's extremely rare and important book *Mémoire sur le choix et l'état des lieux où le passage de Vénus du 3 juin 1769 pourra être observé avec le plus d'avantage et principalement sur la position géographique des Isles de la mer du sud* (P.G. Cavelier, Paris, 1767) [RB Misc 2441]. It is worth noting that James Cook also carried a copy of Pingré's book with him on the *Endeavour* and used it in his arguments against the British hydrographer Alexander Dalrymple.

Cook became familiar with Marion's achievements when he met Julien Crozet at the Cape of Good Hope in 1774. The two men struck up a warm friendship. George Forster tells us "M. Crozet [...] attended by

all his officers, dined with us, upon Captain Cook's invitation, and entertained us with many curious particulars relating to his voyage." Cook himself wrote: "Captain Crozet seemed to be a man possessed of the true spirit of a discoverer and have abilities equal to his good will". Cook also recorded that Crozet informed him that "Captain Morion [*sic*] in about the Latitude 48°s and from 16° to 30° of Longitude, East of the Cape of Good Hope, discovered Six Islands which were high and barren." In generous recognition of the fact that he had been pre-empted, Cook renamed the largest of the Prince Edward Group in Marion Dufresne's honour. Today Marion Island is a South African possession.

Shortly after Marion Dufresne landed in Tasmania, another Frenchman, Louis François Marie Alleno de Saint-Allouarn (1738-1772), who had become separated from Kerguelen in the southern Indian Ocean, sailed to western New Holland and landed at what is now Flinders Bay on 17 March 1772 and at Shark Bay on 29 March before following the coast to Melville Island and returning to Mauritius via Timor. He and his men were the first Frenchmen to set foot on the Australian mainland. Unfortunately Saint-Allouarn died shortly after his return to Mauritius and left no comprehensive account of his voyage. Sixteen years later, Jean François de La Pérouse (1741-1788) disappeared after visiting Botany Bay in 1788. Fortunately for posterity, he had earlier put an officer named Lesseps ashore on the coast of Siberia with dispatches and journal extracts for Versailles. Amid the turmoil of the Revolution (which is itself very well represented in the National Library's Rare Book Collection), La Pérouse's unfinished account of his voyage was edited by a retired general named M. L. A. Milet-Mureau and published under the title *Voyage de la Pérouse autour du monde* (Paris, 1797). Australians have access to this work in their National Library.

The search for La Pérouse brought the expedition of Joseph-Antoine Bruny d'Entrecasteaux (1791-1793) to Australian waters. This was followed by Nicolas Baudin's scientific expedition (1801-1803) and the trading expeditions of Alexandre Le Corre (1802) and Louis Coutance (1804) from Mauritius. This curiosity over New Holland and Van Diemen's Land, which would persist even after the defeats of Trafalgar and Waterloo, convinced the British that the French had colonial ambitions in the region. Van Diemen's Land had already been colonized by the British as a pre-emptive measure; it was soon followed by Swan River in Western Australia.

Both Bruny d'Entrecasteaux and Baudin died before returning to France and publishing personal memoirs, but others who sailed with them recorded their versions of events. Aside from the accounts of Jacques Julien Houtou de Labillardière [NK 6660] and Elizabeth-Paul Edouard de Rossel [NK 2467] who accompanied Bruny d'Entrecasteaux, the National Library holds François Péron's and Louis de Freycinet's biased official record of Nicolas Baudin's expedition. (It was Péron who took it upon himself to spy in Port Jackson and recommend to General Decaen, governor of Mauritius, that the infant British settlement should be destroyed while it was still possible.) Our national collection also holds a little known manuscript by a sailor named Rolland who sailed with Louis Isidore Duperrey (1786–1865) on *La Coquille* which circum-navigated the globe from east to west in 1822–1825. Duperrey had orders to survey the Western Australian coast but failed to do so because of disease among his crew, a lack of provisions and the difficulty of sailing south against the prevailing winds. Rolland's journal has escaped the attention of previous scholars who have undertaken exhaustive surveys, transcriptions and translations of surviving journals from French Pacific voyages. It has only recently been translated and edited by Dr Serge Rivière and Thuy Huynh Einam of James Cook University, Townsville. (Dr Rivière was also recently awarded a Harold White Fellowship to study the National Library's rich holdings of original French-language editions of the works of Voltaire.)

Between 1826 and 1829, *La Coquille*, rechristened *Astrolabe* (in honour of La Pérouse's flagship) and under the command of Jules Dumont d'Urville (1790–1842), visited Australia and many Melanesian and Polynesian islands. Between 1837 and 1840, d'Urville returned to Oceanic and Australian waters, but also ventured twice to the unknown frozen continent of Antarctica. Two years after his last great voyage, d'Urville, together with his wife Adélie and only surviving son, died in a railway accident. The sweeping grandeur of his navigational achievements and his tragic death invite comparisons with James Cook and La Pérouse. D'Urville was also a man of science and letters with an established reputation in botanical, entomological and archeological circles. (He was awarded the *Légion d'honneur* for his efforts on behalf of France in acquiring the "Vénus de Milos".) As a scholar, d'Urville was closely involved in the writing and publication of the accounts of his expeditions and their scientific findings. The remarkable and beautifully

illustrated multi-volume work *Voyage de la Corvette l'Astrolabe* is a precious part of the National Library's Rex Nan Kivell collection. It is complemented by an original oil on canvas [NK 11641] believed to be by Louis Auguste de Sainson (1801–1887) of the inauguration of the monument to La Pérouse at Vanikoro by d'Urville and his crew (c.1828).

Much important recent scholarship on French exploration by Australian historians such as Frank Horner, Brian Plomley, Christine Cornell, Leslie Marchant and Helen Rosenman has automatically been added to the collection through legal deposit. But the National Library's French holdings are far from limited to the explorers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Voltaire or the French Revolution. The range is extraordinary, if not bizarre: from a manuscript work on Gilles de Rays, Baron de Laval (1404–1440), Joan of Arc's comrade-in-arms and the perverse sex murderer who inspired the legend of Bluebeard, to a large collection of documents, novels, poems, posters, pamphlets and newspapers published in France during the Second World War. Acquired in 1967, this latter collection catalogued in boxes shelved at EF 940.5344 W927 is remarkable for its symmetry of resistance *and* collaborationist material.

English may be the Latin of the modern age, but French still has great importance as an official, co-official or semi-official language in many nations of the world. The scientific, cultural and political periodicals of these nations are represented in the National Library, as are many works of literature and history—often long before they appear in English translations. They are an invaluable resource.

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Note

- * Dr Edward Duyker's biography of Marion Dufresne, *An Officer of the Blue* was published by Melbourne University Press in May 1994. A review will appear in a subsequent number of *Explorations*. [Ed.]